

## STRANGE FRUIT As sung by BILLIE HOLIDAY

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

NOTE: **Lynching** is murder by mob, often by hanging, but also by burning at the stake or shooting, in order to punish an alleged transgressor, or to intimidate, control, or otherwise manipulate a specific sector of a population.

### About the Singer



**Billie Holiday** (born **Eleanora Fagan**: April 7, 1915 – July 17, 1959) was an American jazz singer and songwriter. Nicknamed "Lady Day" by her friend and musical partner Lester Young, Holiday had a seminal influence on jazz and pop singing. Her vocal style, strongly inspired by jazz instrumentalists, pioneered a new way of manipulating phrasing and tempo.

Critic John Bush wrote that Holiday "changed the art of American pop vocals forever."<sup>[5]</sup> She co-wrote only a

few songs, but several of them have become jazz standards, notably "God Bless the Child", "Don't Explain", "Fine and Mellow", and "Lady Sings the Blues". She also became famous for singing "Easy Living", "Good Morning Heartache", and "Strange Fruit", a protest song which became one of her standards and was made famous with her 1939 recording. Music critic Robert Christgau called her "uncoverable, possibly the greatest singer of the century".

### About the Song

"Strange Fruit" is a song performed most famously by Billie Holiday, who first sang and recorded it in 1939. Written by a white, Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx and a member of the Communist Party, Abel Meeropol wrote it as a protest poem, exposing American racism, particularly the lynching of African Americans. Such lynchings had occurred chiefly in the South but also in other regions of the United States. Meeropol set it to music and with his wife and the singer Laura Duncan, performed it as a protest song in New York venues, including at Madison Square Garden.

Barney Josephson, the founder of Cafe Society in Greenwich Village, New York's first integrated nightclub, heard the song and introduced it to Billie Holiday. Other reports say that Robert Gordon, who was directing Billie Holiday's show at Cafe Society, heard the song at Madison Square Garden and introduced it to her. Holiday first performed the song at Cafe Society in 1939. She said that singing it made her fearful of retaliation but, because its imagery reminded her of her father, she continued to sing the piece making it a regular part of her live performances. Because of the poignancy of the song, Josephson drew up some rules: Holiday would close with it; the waiters would stop all service in advance; the room would be in darkness except for a spotlight on Holiday's face; and there would be no encore. During the musical introduction, Holiday would stand with her eyes closed, as if she were evoking a prayer.

Holiday approached her recording label, Columbia, about the song, but the company feared reaction by record retailers in the South, as well as negative reaction from affiliates of its co-owned radio network, CBS. Even John Hammond, Holiday's producer, refused. So she turned to friend Milt Gabler, whose Commodore label produced alternative jazz. Holiday sang "Strange Fruit" for him a cappella, and moved him to tears.